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The Challenges and Future of Spiritan Mission

Phung Manh Tien C.S.Sp.

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Phung Manh Tien,
C.S.Sp.

Phung Manh Tien, C.S.Sp., a Vietnamese of the Province of Taiwan-Vietnam-India, studied theology at the Loyola School of Theology, Quezon City, Metro-Manila, Philippines from 2014–2020. He earlier won the Competition on the Holy Spirit in 2016. Ordained deacon in January 2020 after having made perpetual profession on 3rd August 2019, he received his first mission appointment to Taiwan.

*happy to participate
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THE CHALLENGES AND FUTURE OF SPIRITAN MISSION

We are living in a modern world with plenty of opportunities and lots of challenges. Modern society with advanced technology can help produce more foods, create more wealth and other convenient things, but we are also witness to many people suffering from abject poverty and experiencing a lot of crisis. In the church, signs of “spiritual desertification”¹ have become manifest in recent decades, especially in European countries, vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life have dried up in some countries which used to be a source of missionaries. In Asia, although we can see that faith and vocation are vibrant, great numbers of people have not heard the message of the gospel yet. For these reasons, the *missio ad gentes* (Evangelization and New Evangelization) continue to be most urgent.

“In the midst of God’s people, among the numerous and varied vocations, we Spiritans are called by the Father and ‘set apart’ to follow Jesus and announce the Good News of the Kingdom” (SRL 1). Jesus’ voice still resonates in our hearts, calling us to reach back to the roots of our faith and to “go, make disciples of all the nations” (Matt 28:19). We are indeed very happy to participate in the mission entrusted by God to go forth and reach out to the peripheries, to “peoples, groups and individuals who have not yet heard the message of the Gospel, or who have scarcely heard it, to those whose needs are the greatest and to the oppressed” (SRL 4). Through many years, we have been faithful to the rich heritage of our Founders—Claude Poullart des Places and Francis Libermann—and continued to carry on the legacy of our predecessors. Both Poullart des Places and Francis Libermann had a passion for the poor. To continue our mission in fidelity with the charism of our founders, we need to reflect on our consecrated life, rediscover the “apostolic life” as envisaged by our founders, and at the same time discern, in prayer with the community, new ways of doing our Spiritan mission, the Holy Spirit calling us to commit ourselves to the evangelization of the poor in the present reality of a globalized world.

1. LIVING SPIRITAN MISSION IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF OUR FOUNDERS

Poullart des Places renounced a brilliant career and made a radical choice of self-giving to embrace poverty. It was his encounter with Christ who emptied himself and his fidelity to the Holy Spirit that led him in his initial efforts in favor of seminarians. He left his comfort zone and his family status in order to build a community with indigent seminaries who

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were unable to pay for their studies. Seeing the clergy of his time as preoccupied with ambition and the desire for material wealth, he desired to prepare priests who, in obedience to the Spirit, would be willing throughout their lives to live a spirit of poverty and evangelical openness for the service of the poor and the abandoned. They would then be ready and available to take on the humble and difficult tasks of their ministry.² For Poullart des Place, motivation for apostolic commitment is the glory of God and responding to his love in the situations around him. His aim for the seminary of the Holy Spirit was to “train young clerics to be detached from the goods of this world . . . their preference will be to choose the most difficult places and the most abandoned posts, in short, the tasks for which it is most difficult to find workers.”³

The missionary orientation of Claude Poullart des Places was taken up by Francis Libermann. Libermann was willing to do the will of God in concrete situations. He knew much about the poor, the oppressed and the suffering of his time, especially the black slaves, of whom he heard from Levavas seur and Tisserant. When he was invited by these two Créole seminarians, he experienced a call to commit to the project to liberate the Black Slaves and to lead the group in the *Work for the Blacks*. It was this passion for the Work for the Blacks that inspired members of his Society of the Holy Heart of Mary to mission in Reunion, Haiti, Mauritius, and West Africa.⁴

In 1848 came the fusion of Libermann’s missionary Society of the Holy Heart of Mary with the Congregation of the Holy Spirit that Poullart des Places founded. Libermann brought his youthful society to the Spiritans and widened the boundaries of the Spiritan Congregation to serve the poor and the most abandoned in the world. That missionary work brought the Congregation beyond France to other European and African countries, and currently to the other three continents of the world. The evangelization of the poor continues to be carried on by Spiritans all over the world.

Libermann described the missionary task of the Congregation to Dom Salier as follow: “To preach the good news to the poor, that is our general goal. Nevertheless, the missions are the principal object we aim at, and in the missions we have chosen the most wretched and abandoned souls.”⁵

2. CHALLENGES FACING SPIRITANS MISSION OF EVANGELIZATION IN THE MODERN WORLD

2.1. Spiritan Demographic Shift

Society today has been changing greatly and continues to change due to technological advances and the digital

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revolution; there is as well the phenomenon of international migration. In the context of our religious and missionary life, we also experience the joy and challenges of the older circumscriptions as well as the new ones in the modern world. In order to do our mission, we need to observe and read the “signs of the time.” We cannot “stick to the habits and spirit of former time” but “let us embrace the new order with honesty and simplicity and bring to it the spirit of the Gospel.”⁶ Indeed, there is a significant shift taking place in the church, and in our Congregation in particular, in the situation of mission. Times have changed. Due to a lack of vocations, gone are the days when Europe was a source of missionaries for the whole world. In our Congregation, there is a dramatic drop of vocations in Europe and North America. The reality today is that while there are declining numbers in the North, we are witnessing the blossoming of vocations and missionaries from the South, especially in Africa.⁷ On 16 November, 2018, the superior general and his council gave fifty candidates their mission appointments—most of them were from the South.

On the other hand, we are faced with the ageing of our confreres in Europe. In spite of the numbers of diminishing confreres, the needs of various missions and the needs within their own communities are not declining. Our confreres may find it hard to respond to them. Therefore, this situation will lead to some new challenges, indicating there is a need to plan for the future in terms of taking care of the sick and aged confreres, devising a strategy to maintain communities and apostolates, and handing on the Spiritan heritage to new generations. We see a number of missionaries from the South going as missionaries to Europe and North America. Our Congregation is more and more diversified, there are international communities. This will bring positive aspects as well as new challenges inherent in international community living. One of the concerns is how to maintain the unity of “one heart and one soul” in an increasingly diversified Congregation.

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2.2. Community Life and Mission

Life in community is a gift of God inviting us to share the life of the Trinitarian communion. It is the community that helps us to listen to the Spirit and live out our religious vocation. We are called to live out our vocation in community (SRL 27) because it is an essential element in the Spiritan way of life and a privileged means for us to practice the evangelical counsels in the service of the Good News (SRL 28). While Poullart des Places considered community as the best place to form future apostolic workers, Libermann saw community as essential for

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us to carry out the mission, “the life of our missionaries is a community life; they must never remain isolated.”⁸ He stated that community was not simply a physical place for people to live together under the same roof, but a “union of minds and hearts for a common purpose.”⁹

Communion and fraternity have to be a first priority of the community, not the efficiency of the works we are doing. Some have a tendency to ignore community life and make excuses such as “being at the side of the poor, the marginalized, and so on.” There is no excuse for such a zeal for mission to the extent that they do not have enough quality time for communal prayers, sharing in the Eucharist, moments of celebration, dialogue, and responsibility. Community and mission are mutually enriching and they go hand in hand. Our Congregation has become more and more culturally diverse. The cultural diversity of our members is a gift of the Holy Spirit of Pentecost who brings us together from different cultures, outlooks, nations (SRL 37). However, for community to be “one heart and one soul” (Acts 4:32), we need to combat every form of individualism.¹⁰ Tension may also arise from international and intercultural living. It can be the different perceptions and mission visions between younger and older confreres, between the community and individuals. Some confreres may feel uncomfortable by “a perceived African ‘take over’ of the Congregation and thus may respond inappropriately to the impending changes ahead”¹¹ Indeed, to be “one heart and one soul,” there should be “no *us* and *them* but only a community seeking to identify itself inclusively as *we*.”¹² There may be no unity in “one heart and one souls” (Acts 4:32) if each individual does not make an effort to build up the community through humility, dialogue, and service. This will be impossible if we do not fix our eyes on Jesus Christ who “came to serve, not to be served” (Mark 10:45).

2.3 Mission as ‘preferential Option for the Poor’.

In the opening of the *Spiritans Rule of Life*, we see the passage from the Gospel of Luke (Luke 4:18-19) affirming that it is the Spirit of the Lord who anoints and sends us to bring glad tidings to the poor. We have been called to participate in God’s mission on the frontline of missionary activity working with people at the margins of society. “Attention to the poorest and most abandoned is at the heart of the intuition of both Claude Poullart des Places and Francis Libermann. This is an important criterion for our lifestyle and discerning the works we take on”¹³ Who are the “poor” we want to serve? In the *Spiritans Rule of Life*, descriptive adjectives give more explicit meaning to the term “poor”. They include the poor

(SRL 4; 24.1; 70; 71; 71.1; 82), “oppressed” (SRL 4; 11; 12), “disadvantaged” (SRL 12; 71), “the weak” (SRL 14), “the little ones” (SRL 14; 30), “uprooted” (SRL 71). We can also find categories about “the poor” today in our official documents which are explicit regarding people and the groups. They are young people in difficulty, refugees, immigrants/migrants, the homeless, the landless, the unemployed, the victims of ethnic strife and corruption, the uprooted, the voiceless, and those marginalized by the phenomenon of globalization.¹⁴

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The poor are not anonymous people at the peripheries of society. They have faces and specific names and have their own families. Anthony Gittins expresses convincingly that “in order to be really committed to the poor and most abandoned people, we must endeavor to know them by name, to identify and relate to them in a personal way.”¹⁵ When we commit ourselves to them, it doesn’t mean that we just try to provide what they are lacking or what is necessary. It is not primarily a matter of doing things for people, nor can we presume to do what is best for them with our own mentality, but we should listen to them first to be in solidarity with them in order to know what is happening in their lives and understand their desires, needs, and dreams.

In the work of evangelization, we need to get rid of the mentality that we are the givers and the people are simply recipients who have nothing to share in return, that we are preachers who proclaim the message of the Good News and the people are the ones who need conversion. This mentality or attitude no longer conveys the authentic process of transformation towards sharing the Good News. Instead, we are evangelizers and are ourselves evangelized, preachers of the Good News and also recipients.¹⁶ In the process of sharing the Good News, “we are called to repent and be converted as much as we are called to call others to repentance and conversion.”¹⁷ Therefore, mission is not a one-way traffic, rather a mutual exchange between the missionary and the people in which both missionaries and the people have something to give and take. We are conscious of this challenging journey of evangelization that helps us to be more humble as we continue to learn, to share, and to open ourselves to people in the vast missionary field, especially to people on Asian soil.

3. SPIRITAN MISSION IN ASIA

3.1 Mission in the Asian context

Asia is the largest and most populated continent. Its current population is around 4,566,561,736 and is home to over 60% of humanity.¹⁸ Asia is the cradle of most of the world’s great religions, such as Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism,

Vast numbers of peoples are still thirsting for “the living water”

Confucianism, Islam, and Taoism as well as local indigenous faith traditions. By mid-2018, the number of Christians in Asia was 397,252,000 people¹⁹ which made up about 8.7 % of the Asian’s population. Many Asian people are vulnerable to poverty, degradation, violence due to the misguided and selfish power politics. Many tend towards indifferentism, consumerism, and materialism and the young become prey to various ideologies that claim to give liberation from injustice and poverty. Vast numbers of peoples are still thirsting for “the living water” while the presence of many religious traditions demands that the work of evangelization be done in a true spirit of receptivity, respect, dialogue, and humility. The evangelization of the church is not simply to convert people to an institutional church. The purpose of mission is in obedience to Christ’s command to proclaim the Good News of God to humanity. Among the challenges to our mission, we have to discern what the Spirit is saying to our mission in Asia.

3.2 Spiritan presence in Asia

Spiritans were present in Asia many years ago between 1730 and 1778. A dozen confreres entered the Paris Foreign Missions Society (MEP) in order to be sent to the Far East. In 1733, Fr. Guillaume Rivoal was the first Spiritan to set sail to Cochin China (Southern Vietnam), and Jacques de Bourgerie stayed in Macao.²⁰ Several others followed; four of the six Bishops of the Foreign Missions in the Far East were Spiritans, namely Armand Lefebvre in Cochin, Vietnam; Louis Devaux in Tonkin (northern Vietnam) from 1746; Edmond Bennetat in Cambodia from 1748, and Jean-Baptiste Maigrot, in Setchoan, China from 1753. Later, there were Bishops Guillaume Piguel in Cambodia and Francis Pottier in Setchoan.²¹

In the nineteenth century, Spiritans were sent to Pondicherry and Chandernagor, India. Spiritans only remained there from 1863 to 1888. At present, Spiritans are working in seven countries in the Union of Circumscriptions of East Asia and Oceania (UCAO). In Pakistan, our confreres have been involved in mission since 1977. In Taiwan and the Philippines, our mission started in 1997. In 2007, confreres were sent to Vietnam to establish a community, and in 2009 the mission in India began. In 1846, the first Spiritans set foot in Australia; the presence of Spiritans in Papua New Guinea started in 1971. In the future, an outreach to China will be one of the challenges for our mission in Asia. The project for mainland China should be continued, though we can see its challenges. We cannot expect immediate results but “let us stay in his hands like empty vessels. If he deigns to make us serve the purpose of his house, he knows how to do it, in due course, when he pleases.”²²

We cannot expect immediate results

3.3 Challenges for the Spiritans in Asia

We are called to explore and discover new methods and means of evangelization for transmitting the Gospel effectively. The challenge we are facing is “how to proclaim the Gospel to a vast multitude whose hunger for transcendence finds fulfilment in the bosom of ancestral religions.”²³

3.3.1 Mission as Inculturation

Our missionary services need to take into consideration the local situation, and the quality of our services depends on how much we understand it. Wherever we are doing our mission, we must be attentive to “inculturation.” We need to become one with the people to adapt and inculturate among them. It requires us to understand the realities of those among whom we work, such as local languages, cultural studies, and the specific anthropological, social, and religious traits of the people.²⁴ Libermann advised his missionaries to respect the local culture, adapt to local people and customs, respect people’s freedom: “Do not judge by first impressions. Do not judge according to what you have seen in Europe, according to what you have been used to . . . Become Negro with the Negroes and you will judge them appropriately.”²⁵ It takes time for us to immerse ourselves in the culture, to understand, appreciate, and adapt our preaching of the Gospel to the culture of the place we are sent, so that people can receive the Good News in a credible and fruitful way according to their distinctive character, group, and environment. Our evangelizing activities need to “work out a strategic plan in keeping with our charism and taking into account the social and ecclesial contexts”²⁶

*Become Negro with
the Negroes*

3.3.2 Mission as Interreligious Dialogue

In the context of religious plurality and diverse cultures in Asia, interreligious dialogue is considered one of our greatest challenges; we are called to dialogue with people of other religions and of no religion, because it is an important element of our mission. We take into consideration the four levels of dialogue, namely, dialogue of everyday life, the dialogue of collaborating in common projects, spiritual dialogue, and theological dialogue.”²⁷ In Asia, when we engage in dialogue with non-Christian religions, we should pay more attention to dialogue of life because it helps us to overcome the obstacles of fear and prejudice, and it helps to promote mutual understanding and appreciation. We also seek for dialogue of spiritual experience because it helps us to discover and explore each other’s spiritual ways in depth, in order to understand and respect the other’s point of view.²⁸ Certainly, it requires our humility and “an attitude of openness in truth and in love”²⁹ towards people of

*Proclaiming Jesus
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other faiths and none in order to journey together, accept their different ways of living, share their joys and sorrows. At the same time, we “welcome them with joy, inviting them to share our spirituality and our apostolic life.” (SRL 24.3)

Other religions also contain “seeds of the Word”³⁰ and “Rays of Truth.”³¹ Proclaiming Jesus needs to take into full account what is good and true in other religions and appreciate the values of the kingdom. Pope John Paul II tells us that narrating Jesus’ story can be a most effective way akin to Asian cultural forms to proclaim Jesus Christ.³² It is the Holy Spirit who opens the hearts of listeners and invites them to accept the values of the Gospel where people, especially the poor and the marginalized, can find mercy, compassion, and hope in Jesus’ story.

3.3.3 Mission as Promoting Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation

In SRL 12, we confirmed that in faithfulness to the intuitions and heritages of our founders, we give preference to an apostolate that takes us to those oppressed and most disadvantaged. The particular situations of Asian soil, especially our missions in the Province of Taiwan-Vietnam and India, challenge us to seek out new ways of doing missions, adapt and take on new initiatives to inculturate ourselves in order to dialogue with people, and empower them to hear and accept the Good News. At the same time, in some countries of Asia, where many people are victims of different types of injustice, it also challenges us to respond to the realities by living solidarity with the poor and oppressed and making ourselves “the advocates, the supporters and the defenders of the weak and the little ones against all who oppress them.”³³ Bagamoyo reminded us of what Maynooth and Torre d’Aguilha had asked each circumscription to do, namely “draw up a plan taking into account the local realities”³⁴ in order to help promote justice, peace, and integrity of creation. SRL 14.1 reminds us that we need to make efforts to analyze social situations in order to understand structural problems as root causes of injustice and poverty. In our humble service, we should cooperate with others to be the voice for the voiceless, so that Jesus’ voice may be heard when we proclaim the Gospel and bring people closer to Jesus in the midst of injustice, oppression, or violence. Let us look to Mary for inspiration to draw on the apostolic spirit in our work of evangelization.

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4. LIVING OUR SPIRITAN MISSION WITH MARY AS OUR MODEL.

Mary holds an important role in Libermann’ missionary spirituality; he devoted our mission to the protection of the

Immaculate Heart of Mary. He saw in her “a perfect model of faithfulness to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit”³⁵ and confirmed that “we live our mission in willing obedience to the Holy Spirit, taking Mary as our model” (SRL 5). She gave us a marvellous example for our evangelization. By her saying “Yes” at the Annunciation “may it be done to me according to your word,” Mary exemplified her availability and openness to the Holy Spirit to commit herself to her Son and his mission. Mary didn’t keep the Good News for herself, but brought Jesus in her womb to her cousin and at that moment of the visit filled both Elizabeth and John the Baptist in her womb with the joy of the Good News, under the influence of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:39-45). At the wedding in Cana (John 2:1-11), Mary’s solicitude and compassion for the other enabled her to see the host’s difficult moment and to act to remedy it by bringing their concern to Jesus and asking him to intervene. As a result, Mary brought people and their concerns close to Jesus. Evangelization is sharing the Good News, bringing Jesus to other people, and bringing people to Jesus.

*A fire can only be lit
by something that is
itself on fire*

Fr. Libermann contemplates Mary’s Heart as the perfect model of apostolic zeal: “her heart is eminently apostolic and burns with desire for the glory of God and the salvation of all people.”³⁶ When our hearts are inflamed with the fire of ardent love, we will be able to spread that fire to those whom we have encountered. But “A fire can only be lit by something that is itself on fire.”³⁷ How can we Spiritans bring the Gospel to other people if our hearts are not on fire like the Heart of Mary, or if our life is a counter-witness to the Gospel we want to bring? How can we ‘retell the story of Jesus’ to people convincingly, if we do not have a deep personal experience with Jesus or if our life is a counter-witness to the Jesus’ story? Evangelization is not a matter of doing things or doing something for people. Of course, effectiveness in our apostolic works is also important. However, if we do not conform our interior lives to that of Mary but think only in terms of activity, the good we can do for people will be very much less than it should be.³⁸

*It is holiness and
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When our life of witness is consistent with our proclamation of the Jesus’ story, our preaching will become authentic and credible and then we can bring Jesus to people as well as draw people closer to Jesus or the Gospel’s values. In the letter to Fr. Charles Lairé, Libermann reminded him of the deep impact of a holy life on the work of evangelization. It is not clever or capable missionaries that people will listen to in order to follow the way of the Gospel, but our holiness: “Your most important preaching will be your holy life and the good example that you give and God will send grace to these people . . . It is holiness and the sacrifice of their priests that

will be the instrument of their salvation . . . Be holy and urge your confreres to be holy.”³⁹

CONCLUSION

The XX General chapter in Bagamoyo realized the challenges of our missionary life in our globalized, multicultural, and at times secularized world that requires us to renew our methods of evangelization. As we are facing challenges of evangelization, Pope Francis calls us to encounter and lay hold of the love of Jesus and share that love “marked by the fire of passion for the kingdom of God and the proclamation of the joy of the Gospel.”⁴⁰ No matter how many good works we are committed to doing for the poor, we need to radically affirm that we are participating in God’s mission, not ours, that we are proclaiming the Word of God, not ours, and that the Holy Spirit to whom we are dedicated is “the principal agent of evangelization”⁴¹ and the “source of the apostolic spirit.”⁴² We, Spiritans, are called to become leaven, salt, and light in the world and continue our initiatives, and to work creatively and earnestly under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We are participating in God’s mission. Our mission means trying to find out God’s will and simply being docile to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. In order to live the Spiritan charism authentically today, we joyfully surrender our will to God’s will and respond to the call of evangelization through our availability and docility to the Holy Spirit. “Divine Spirit, I wish to be before you as a light feather, so that your breath may carry me off where it wishes and that I may never offer it the least resistance.”⁴³ No matter how many difficulties we may encounter on our missionary journey, we are not afraid because Jesus will always be with us (Matt 28:20) and we can say to the Lord with readiness and willingness, “Here I am. Send me!” (Isa 6:8).

Our mission means trying to find out God’s will and simply being docile to the promptings of the Holy Spirit

*Phung Manh Tien, C.S.Sp.
Manila, Philippines*

ABBREVIATIONS

- E.S. *Ecrits Spirituels*. Spiritual writings of Venerable Francis Libermann.
- NA Vatican II, Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions *Nostra aetate*. Cited from edition of James H. Kroeger. Pasay City: Paulines, 1999.
- N.D. *Notes et Documents relatifs à la vie et à l’oeuvre du vénérable*

François-Marie Paul Libermann. 16 volumes of the writing of the Congregation's cofounder, Venerable François-Marie Paul Libermann

SRL *Spiritan Rule of Life*.

ENDNOTES

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26. Bagamoyo 1.9.

27. Bagamoyo 1.11
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29. Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*. Pasay City: Paulines Publishing House, 2013, no. 250.
30. Ibid., no. 11
31. *Nostra Aetate*, no. 2.
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33. Règlements, 1849; N.D. X, 517
34. Bagamoyo 1.22.
35. N.D. X, 568
36. See *A Spiritan Anthology: Writings of Claude-François Poullart Des Places (1679–1709) and François Marie-Paul Libermann (1802–1852)*. Chosen and presented by Christian de Mare, C.S.Sp. Roma: Congregation of the Holy Spirit, 2011, 272.
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38. *A Spiritan Anthology*, 273
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